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FEATURE ARTICLE

“Organic” or Opportunistic? Misleading Claims in Fiji’s Food Market

What Does “Organic” Really Mean?

“Organic” refers to a system of agriculture that works in harmony with nature. At its core, organic farming avoids synthetic pesticides, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), artificial fertilizers, and antibiotics. The practice emerged globally in the early 20th century as a response to the industrialization of agriculture, gaining mainstream traction in the 1970s with the rise of environmental awareness.

Today, the term "organic" has evolved into a global certification standard. In countries like Australia, New Zealand, the US, and EU member states, organic products are subject to strict regulations and third-party verification. But here in Fiji, the misuse of the “organic” label is becoming increasingly common—and alarmingly misleading.

As Fijian consumers become more health-conscious and environmentally aware, demand for organic products is rising. Supermarkets, farmers’ markets, and online vendors are responding with a flood of items labeled as “organic,” “natural,” or “chemical-free.” Unfortunately, in many cases, these claims are not backed by any certification or credible verification process.

This deceptive practice not only exploits the trust of consumers but also undermines genuine organic farmers who adhere to proper standards and practices.

What Counts as Certified Organic in Fiji?

To be recognized as organic, a product must be certified by an authorized body responsible for verifying organic standards. In Fiji, there are local and regional efforts like the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS)—a locally focused quality assurance system for organic certification that relies on active participation and trust among stakeholders. Instead of relying on expensive third-party certifications, PGS empowers small-scale farmers to label and sell their organic produce in local markets, gaining access to wider markets and potentially higher prices.

If a product is truly organic, it will clearly state the certifying authority, display a certification mark, and provide traceable producer information. A mere “organic” sticker or handwritten sign at a market stall is not enough.

How Are Consumers Being Duped?

The Consumer Council of Fiji has observed a troubling pattern:

Head Office

Level 5 Vanua House
Victoria Parade GPO, Suva
Phone: 3300792/3310183
CEO: 3305864
Fax: 3300115
Email: complaints@consumersfiji.org

Lautoka/West

Suite 4 Popular Building
Vidilo Street
P.O. Box 5396, Lautoka
Phone: 6664987
Email: consumerlkt@connect.com.fj

Labasa/North

Shop 2, Mudaliar Investment
Sangam Avenue Street
P.O. Box 64, Labasa
Phone: 8812559
Email: colbs@connect.com.fj



- Some market vendors claim their vegetables are “organic” but admit, upon questioning, that they occasionally use chemical fertilizers or pesticides.
- Packaged goods labeled as “organic” lack any certification details or production transparency.
- Online retailers and influencers aggressively market “organic herbal teas” or “organic oils” with no laboratory testing or documented sourcing.

In short, many so-called organic products on our shelves may only be organic in name.

Red Flags to Watch Out For

1. Lack of Certification

One of the most immediate red flags is the absence of certification. A truly organic product—whether it's fruit, vegetables, grains, oils, or processed foods—should carry a label from a recognized certifying agency. This could be an international body such as Australia's NASAA Certified Organic, New Zealand's BioGro, or a locally supported initiative like the Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) used in some parts of Fiji and the Pacific.

Certification means that a product has undergone inspection and verification against established organic standards, covering everything from how crops are grown and processed to how they are packaged and transported. Without certification, a seller's claim of “organic” remains unverified and should be treated with caution.

2. Vague or Misleading Language

The language used to promote a product can also be a clue. Words like “natural,” “chemical-free,” “eco-friendly,” or “pesticide-free” might sound reassuring, but these terms are not the same as organic and are not legally regulated in Fiji. Sellers often use these phrases to create a green image, even when their farming or processing practices don't meet any recognized organic standards.

For example, a vendor might say their produce is “chemical-free” because they avoid certain pesticides, but if they are still using synthetic fertilizers or spraying during early growth stages, the product cannot be truly considered organic. Similarly, “homegrown” or “from the farm” might sound appealing but provide no assurance about the inputs used.

3. Prices That Seem Too Good to Be True

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Lautoka/West

Suite 4 Popular Building
Vidilo Street
P.O. Box 5396, Lautoka
Phone: 6664987
Email: consumerlwk@connect.com.fj

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Sangam Avenue Street
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Phone: 8812559
Email: colbs@connect.com.fj



Another red flag is pricing. Organic farming is more labor-intensive and often more costly due to the careful crop rotation, composting, pest control, and soil health management involved. It usually also involves smaller-scale operations with lower yields compared to conventional farming.

If a vendor is offering a product labeled as “organic” at a price significantly lower than market average, there is a strong possibility that the product is not organic. While prices do vary by location and season, the cost of genuine organic food typically reflects the extra care and resources required to grow and maintain it without synthetic chemicals.

What You Can Do

1. Ask Questions and Stay Informed

As a consumer, one of the most powerful tools you have is your voice. Don't hesitate to ask sellers about their farming practices. Simple questions like “Do you use chemical fertilizers or pesticides?” or “Are your products certified organic?” can reveal a lot. Sellers who are genuine and ethical will welcome your questions and answer them clearly and confidently.

2. Look for Certification Marks

When buying packaged or processed food items, inspect the label carefully. Certification logos from organizations such as NASAA, BioGro, or USDA Organic are good signs. For local produce, ask if the vendor is part of a community-based certification scheme like the PGS, which offers a grassroots method of verifying organic claims based on farmer accountability and peer inspections.

If there is no label and the vendor cannot provide any certification details, think twice before making a purchase—especially if the price or presentation seems suspicious.

3. Report Suspected False Claims

If you suspect that a seller is falsely advertising their products as organic, you have the right—and the responsibility—to report it. The Consumer Council of Fiji investigates such claims and can take appropriate action to protect the interests of consumers. Whether you encounter such practices in a supermarket, a market stall, or an online platform, your report can help curb deceptive trade and improve product standards across the country.

Conclusion

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Email: colbs@connect.com.fj



@CCoFiji



Consumer Council of Fiji



www.consumersfiji.org



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In today's evolving food marketplace, "organic" should not be just another buzzword. It stands for integrity, health, and environmental responsibility. As a consumer in Fiji, staying alert to false claims and making informed decisions is key to protecting your health and your wallet. By knowing the red flags and taking simple yet effective actions, you become part of the movement toward a more honest, transparent, and ethical food system.

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